DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 381 009 FL 022 843

AUTHOR Olson, Susan M.

TITLE Native and Non-Native English Speakers' Current Usage of "Can" and "May" in Requesting Permission.

PUB DATE 95

NOTE 9p.; Paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the Teachers of English to Speakers of Other Languages (28th, Baltimore, MD, March 8-12, 1994).

PUB TYPE Reports - Research/Technical (143) -- Speeches/Conference Papers (150) -- Tests/Evaluation Instruments (160)

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.

DESCRIPTORS Adults; Comparative Analysis; English (Second Language); *Grammar; *Grammatical Acceptability; *Language Patterns; Language Usage; *Limited English Speaking; *Native Speakers; Questionnaires; Surveys

IDENTIFIERS *Politeness; *Requests

ABSTRACT

A study investigated patterns of usage of "can" and "may" (e.g., "May/Can I go to the bathroom?") among native speakers and non-native speakers of English. A questionnaire was administered to 25 native English-speakers, most aged 19-26 and the remainder over age 45, and 56 non-native speakers taking advanced English-as-a-Second-Language classes. The questionnaire contained ten questions (five posed to a friend, three to a teacher, two to a parent), all requesting permission. Respondents chose between "may" and "can" according to their assumptions about their normal use in natural speech. Results indicate that "can" was used much more than "may" among native speakers, although "may" was used noticeably more in speaking to a teacher. Younger native-speaking respondents used "may" more often when speaking to a friend and "can" more often with parents. Among non-native speakers, "can" was used less often than among native speakers, especially in the younger age group, and "may" was used more when addressing a teacher. Overall, non-native use of "can" was similar to that of the younger native-speaker group, except in addressing a teacher. Recommendations for classroom teaching of usage to non-native speakers are offered. The questionnaire is appended. Contains 11 references. (MSE)

****
* Reproductions supplied by EDRS are the best that can be made *
* from the original document. *
****

Susan M. Olson

ED 381 009

NATIVE AND NON-NATIVE ENGLISH SPEAKERS' CURRENT USAGE OF *CAN* AND *MAY* IN REQUESTING PERMISSION

The Controversy

"Can I go to the bathroom, Mr. Smith?"

"I don't know, can you?"

I clearly remember Mr. Jimmy Smith, my 7th-grade band director, being what I perceived as very stubborn, if not absolutely militant, about the *can/may* rule. Every time I asked for permission using *can* (I refused to give in and use *may*), he refused to grant or deny that permission, answering my request with a question such as that above. According to the traditional rule, *can* is only used to express that which is possible, while *may* is used to express that which is permissible. So in the example above, Mr. Smith was implying that I was asking him if I myself was physically capable of going to the bathroom, whereas if I wanted to ask permission, I should say "May I go to the bathroom?" and he would answer, "Yes, you may", or "No, you may not." The problem is that in actual English usage *can* is used both to express possibility and permissibility.

Is this even a controversy anymore? It seems that among ESL teachers, it is not--the two words are both taught as acceptable ways of requesting permission, while *may* is taught as being more formal. One may wonder if elementary school teachers and other public school teachers still teach *can* and *may* as possibility and permissibility, respectively. Seeing what the experts recommend is helpful at this point.

Recommendations of the Experts

Most experts now agree that using *can* to request permission is acceptable English. Perrin

FL 022 843

PERMISSION TO REPRODUCE THIS MATERIAL HAS BEEN GRANTED BY

Susan M. Olson

TO THE EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC).

1

2

BEST COPY AVAILABLE

U.S. DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION
Office of Educational Research and Improvement
EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC)

☐ This document has been reproduced as received from the person or organization originating it.

☐ Minor changes have been made to improve reproduction quality.

• Points of view or opinions stated in this document do not necessarily represent official OERI position or policy.

(1965) and the Harper Dictionary of Contemporary Usage (1975) state that the distinction between using *can* and *may* to request permission is only recognized in very formal English, while Pooley (1974) and Webster's New World Guide to Current American Usage (1988) go even farther to say that *may* should be used to request permission only in formal written English. Swan (1980) and Ebbitt (1990) say that using *may* is a more respectful or polite way of requesting permission, although *can* is also acceptable. Copperud (1980) and Leech (1989) also say that either one is acceptable, but Leech suggests that *may* might be considered to be 'more correct' than *can* when used in this way. In the Webster's Dictionary of English Usage (1989), the *can/may* distinction is referred to as a 'pedagogical tradition' taught in the schools but largely ignored after the students leave the schools. Evans & Evans (1957) say that *can* is used instead of *may* when the decision (I assume of granting or denying permission) is based on objective facts instead of just personal whim (p. 81), but they do not state any evidence or examples of this distinction; nor do any of the other experts mention this point. The consensus seems to be that *can* and *may* are both acceptable to use in requesting permission, *can* being more common and *may* more formal.

Current Trends in Usage by Native and Non-native English Speakers

A questionnaire (see Appendix) was filled out by 25 respondents, nineteen of whom were between the ages of 19 and 26, and six of whom were 45 years and over. The respondents were all native English-speakers from the United States, chosen at random. The same questionnaire was given to 56 non-native speakers of English from various countries taking advanced (this is a pre-college level) listening/speaking classes at the English Language Center at Brigham Young University. The questionnaire contained ten questions--five posed to a friend, three to a teacher, and two to a parent--all requests for permission, in which the respondents had to choose between

can and *may*, whichever they thought they would normally use in natural speech.

TABLE 1. Native English Speakers

	Combined		Ages 19-26		Ages 45+	
Question	can	may	can	may	can	may
to a friend						
1	80%	20%	89%	11%	50%	50%
2	84%	16%	89%	11%	67%	33%
3	88%	12%	95%	5%	67%	33%
4	80%	20%	95%	5%	33%	67%
5	64%	36%	68%	32%	50%	50%
to a teacher						
6	68%	32%	74%	26%	33%	67%
7	76%	24%	84%	16%	50%	50%
8	52%	48%	63%	37%	17%	83%
to a parent						
9	88%	12%	89%	11%	83%	17%
10	88%	12%	89%	11%	83%	17%

The resulting percentages of the use of *can* and *may* by the native speakers are summarized in Table 1. When we look at the combined respondents, it is obvious from the results that *can* was chosen much more than *may* in requesting permission, although the percentage of *may* was noticeably higher when speaking to a teacher, as opposed to a friend or parent. When comparing the two age groups, we can see that the respondents over the age of 45 chose *may* more than the other group of respondents, suggesting more conformation to the traditional rule of *can/may* distionction. This group chose to use *may* more than *can* on items 4, 6, and 8, and chose *can* and *may* equally on items 1, 5, and 7. It seems that this group views the teacher/student relationship as being more formal. They also chose *can* more when speaking to a parent than to a friend or a teacher. The younger group used *may* more when speaking to a teacher than to a parent or friend, but still preferred *can* in that situation. Item 5 is intersting because the younger group had a higher percentage on *may* than they did on the other items when speaking to a friend. The

younger group also chose *can* more than *may* when speaking with their parents, perhaps reflecting a more informal or intimate relationship between children and parents.

TABLE 2. Non-native English Speakers Compared with Natives

	Non-native Speakers		Native Speakers Combined		Native Speakers Ages 19-26	
Question	can	may	can	may	can	may
to a friend						
1	75%	25%	80%	20%	89%	11%
2	77%	23%	84%	16%	89%	11%
3	79%	21%	88%	12%	95%	5%
4	70%	30%	80%	20%	95%	5%
5	66%	34%	64%	36%	68%	32%
to a teacher						
6	16%	84%	68%	32%	74%	26%
7	79%	21%	76%	24%	84%	16%
8	21%	79%	52%	48%	63%	37%
to a parent						
9	75%	25%	88%	12%	89%	11%
10	46%	54%	88%	12%	89%	11%

Table 2 shows the results obtained from the non-native speakers compared to the combined native speakers and the younger group of native speakers. The non-native speakers chose *can* less often than the native speakers did, which is especially obvious when comparing the non-native speakers with the native speakers of the younger age group. (It should be noted that the non-native speakers were closer in age to the 19-26 year-old native group, and since this is their peer group, their usage should ideally match the younger group.) The non-native speakers chose *may* more when addressing a teacher, which may say something about the formality of a teacher/student relationship as viewed by other cultural groups. One interesting point is that the non-native speakers chose *may* more on item 10, which was asking a parent for money. On item 7, which was asking a teacher for permission to ask a question, the non-natives chose *can* much

more than *may*. The reason is not clear, but perhaps the student feel the need to be more polite when asking for an office visit or to talk about something (items 6 and 8), since they chose *may* more on those two items. This pattern also fits the native English speakers, only the difference is not so large in their usage of *can* on item 7. Overall, the non-native speakers' usage of *can* was quite similar to the younger native group, except for in the questions posed to a teacher, where *may* was more common.

Final Recommendations for Usage and Teaching

After reading the recommendations of the experts and exploring the current trends in usage, I would recommend the use of *can* in any situation, while recognizing that *may* may or may not be used (like just now) in a more formal situation, especially in writing. It seems that most of the experts, most native speakers, and most non-native speakers have also recognized *can* as acceptable and even preferable in requesting permission. As ESL teachers, I think we should inform students of the traditional distinction, but encourage more frequent use of *can*, considering that it is more common in native English. We should inform students that native speakers might actually use *can* more often even when speaking with a teacher, if our goal is to aid them in producing more native-like speech. There may be certain phrases or contexts in which people who usually use *can* might choose *may*, as in item 5. If this is the case, we should teach our ESL students that. I would suggest that in spoken and written English, *can* is more common than *may*, while only in more formal writing would *may* bu used. I think it is important that we understand why there is a controversy about this specific usage problem and what the current trends in usage actually are such that we can help our students understand how to use *can* and *may* in a more native-like way.

Limitations of the Study

The questionnaire has obvious limitations, most obvious of which is the fact that it is asking respondents for their perceptions of their own language, or the way in which they use *can* and *may*, instead of how they actually use it. The other problem is that *can* and *may* were the only choices given to the respondents, while they might actually choose to use could or some other form when requesting permission. Despite these weaknesses, interesting trends did appear which may bear ideas for future study.

Further Study

Other areas of study that would be interesting might be that of the use of *can* and *may* as opposed to *could*, their use in granting, denying and reporting permission, the differences between American and British English speakers' usage of the two, and the differences between the ways males and females use them. Looking into the ways in which cultural background effects the use of these words by non-native English speakers, and the ways in which context affects the usage of both non-native and native English speakers, would also be interesting, as would be looking at more than one proficiency level of non-native English speakers. Are there certain set phrases in which speakers would choose *may* over *can*? What effect does cultural background and context have on the choice of which to use? Having answers to some of these questions could help us to give more useful and specific instruction to our students about the important speech act of requesting permission.

APPENDIX

Questionnaire

Age_____ Sex_____ Nationality_____

Please circle the response that you would be most likely to say in natural speech.

To a friend:

1. Can/May I use your pen for a second?
2. Can/May I have some of these Doritos?
3. Can/May I change the channel?
4. Can/May I use the phone now?
5. Can/May I come in?

To a teacher:

6. Can/May I come to your office on Monday?
7. Can/May I ask you a question about the test?
8. Can/May I talk to you for a minute?

To a parent:

9. Can/May take the car?
10. Can/May I borrow some money?

REFERENCES

Copperud, R. H. (1980). American usage and style: the consensus. New York: Litton Educational Publishing, Inc.

Ebbitt, W. R., & Ebbitt, D. R. (1990). Index to English. New York: Oxford University Press.

Evans, B. & Evans, C. (1957). A dictionary of contemporary English usage. New York: Galahad Books.

Leech, G. (1989). An A-Z of English Grammar. London: A division of Hodder & Stoughton.

Merriam-Webster, Inc. (1988). Webster's new world guide to current American usage. Author.

Merriam-Webster, Inc. (1989). Webster's dictionary of English usage. New York: Harper and Row.

Morris, W. & Morris, M. (1975). Harper dictionary of contemporary usage. New York: Harper and Row.

Olson, S. (1995). The current usage of *can* and *may*. Unpublished paper. Brigham Young University.

Perrin. (1965). An index to English.

Pooley, R. C. (1974). The teaching of English usage. Urbana, Illinois: National Council of Teachers of English.

Swan, M. (1980). Practical English usage. Oxford: Oxford University Press.